the stone-filled sea

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by yukla

Summary

He forgets how quickly Wei-qianbei changes faces, sometimes. Like pulling a theater mask over a bruise—color over color, a diversion with the swipe of his hand.

Lan Sizhui navigates a world that hates his father, one endless wave at a time.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

In a time long before our own, when the written word was but a newborn thought, the legendary ruler Yan Di reigned over his domain in the Sheep's Head Mountains.

His youngest daughter, the lively and curious Nüwa, loved seeing the golden sunrise. Every morning, she would rise from her soft bed in the dark just to sit at her open window and watch the light wash over her father's land, bringing in the first breaths of dawn.

Once, Nüwa asked her father to tell her where the sun rose. He replied that it came from the Eastern Sea, and that he would take her to see it one day.

Wei-qianbei sits statue-still in his seat, eyes fluttering in a startled blink. The thick glob of saliva on his cheek slides down at a snail's pace, cutting a wet, shining trail across his face. He doesn't even raise a hand to wipe it away.

"The Yiling Patriarch," sneers the rat-faced man from where he's looming over their table, "is not welcome here."

A heartbeat of shocked silence; then, the tavern descends into chaos.

With an emphatic "How dare you!", Jingyi leaps forward and inserts himself between the man and Wei-qianbei's seat, face like a stony cliff-side; Jin Ling, two tables over, stands up so quickly that his chair clatters backwards onto the stone floor and comes storming over, flinging insults and limbs alike; Ouyang Zizhen whips out a handkerchief from his robes and pushes it into Wei-qianbei's hands, making loud and panicked noises. The rest of the disciples that joined them on Wei-qianbei's special instructional night-hunt have risen up as well, each crying out in affront. In an instant, the stranger is surrounded by a seething mass of seashell-pale robes.

Sizhui allows himself one blistering moment to take in the startled look on Wei-qianbei's face before he joins his peers on their feet.

"A murderer," the man is snarling into Jingyi's furious red face, "a grave-robber and a betrayer of his own sect. A dog like him should've stayed in the Burial Mounds to rot, pah!"

He spits again, eyes flashing.

This time, the disgusting mess lands just shy of Wei-qianbei's feet.

Jin Ling roars in fury. "Try that one more time, I dare you!"

Thankfully, Sizhui steps in before the stranger reaches for his sword, and before Jin Ling tries to strangle the man and escalates the situation into a full-on fistfight. This close to the

offending individual, he can smell the strong stink of alcohol in his breath; he does not wrinkle his nose in disgust, but it is a near thing.

He puts on his most mild, perfect-Lan-disciple face and says, “Xiansheng, I can’t allow you to harass my companions. Please step back.”

The man scoffs, his thin nose upturned in ugly self-righteousness, and stays right where he is. “Why should I listen to you, boy? You all should be ashamed, you weak-spined Lans, harboring a traitor to the cultivation world!”

Sizhui bites back the urge to hit him.

The air in the tavern is already hot and suffocating, as it has been all summer; he takes a deep inhale through his nose and feels the way his sweat-damp inner robe plasters itself onto his skin with each heave of his chest. Then he continues on, voice steady and smooth as a forest creek.

“There’s no need for insults, xiansheng. Our group has just returned from conducting an officially-sanctioned night-hunt; I am the head disciple of the Lan sect. If you insist upon continuing your verbal abuse or try to cause any further altercations, I will have to remove you myself and notify our sect leader.”

“That’s the Chief Cultivator, by the way. And also Wei-qianbei’s husband,” Jingyi pipes up helpfully from over his shoulder.

That catches the stranger’s attention, as Sizhui expected. The drunken man frowns, hazy in that slow, syrup-thick way that only the truly plastered-beyond-belief can achieve.

“Yes, thank you Jingyi.” Sizhui runs an eye over the man, noting the silver pommel of his sword and his distinctive, navy-edged robes. “You’re from the Zhang sect, are you not? I would hate for the relationship between our sects to be affected. Please do not force my hand.”

The man’s bluster comes back in full force. “You dare! I am the senior head of combat at Zhoushan Zhang, and I will not let a group of snotty children like you—”

“I’d hurry along, if I were you,” says Jin Ling from where he’s planted himself in front of his da-jiu. His jaw is clenched so tightly that Sizhui marvels at how his teeth have not yet shattered. “You’ve already offended the Chief Cultivator’s husband, two sect leaders’ sons, and a sect leader.” A vein pulses high in his forehead; in his anger, he becomes a near-twin of Jiang-zongzhu, the resemblance undeniable even with his golden robes and vermilion mark. “Cause any more trouble and see what this bunch of children will do.”

Evidently, that hissed reminder is enough to pierce through the drunken haze of the stranger’s mind and alert him to the precarious situation he’s landed himself in. He takes a few steps back and scans his bleary eyes around the tavern, darting from face to face of each unsympathetic patron in the low, amber light.

“You—you’re all just a bunch of fools! One day, the Yiling Patriarch will turn on you, and you won’t be so haughty then!”

And with that, he stumbles around and beats a wine-soaked, meandering retreat through the doors of the tavern, scowling heavily all the while.

Sizhui blows out the breath he’s been holding, and turns back to peer over Jin Ling’s shoulder at the topic of conversation himself. He’s just in time to see Wei-qianbei hastily rearrange his furrowed brow and pursed lips into a pleasant look of surprise.

Sizhui forgets how quickly Wei-qianbei changes faces, sometimes. Like pulling a theater mask over a bruise—color over color, a diversion with the swipe of his hand.

“Well,” Wei-qianbei says cheerfully, his bright voice a golden spear through the dark, uncomfortable silence that has descended upon the tavern, “that sure was tense! Sit down, you all, the food is going to go cold.”

He looks over to their murmuring audience as well. Several people stare back in unabashed curiosity, gawking at the spectacle; others turn away in embarrassment and pretend they were never watching in the first place. “Nothing to see over here! Show’s over, sorry for the disturbance.”

Wei-qianbei waits until all the heads across the room have turned back to their meals before twisting around in his seat and aiming an unbothered smile at the juniors re-joining him at the table. “What’s with your faces?”

To Sizhui’s right, Jin Ling sputters in disbelief. “What’s wrong with *us?* We should be asking what’s wrong with *you!* How can you act like nothing happened, that asshole just spat on your face!” The rest of the table nods along emphatically, making earnest noises of agreement. “He called you a dog, and you fucking hate dogs! You didn’t even try to fight him, or anything. You didn’t even stand up!”

Jingyi joins in. “Yeah, Wei-qianbei! You’re just gonna let random people treat you like that? Why didn’t you put him in his place?”

“Oh, you silly kids,” Wei-qianbei sighs fondly. “What’s there to fight about? A lot of what he said was right.”

“But—!”

“I did kill people, I did raise the dead, and I did leave my own sect. Is that not true? And besides, I had you all to help me out just now. Such upstanding young people!”

Zizhen tries to protest. “Qianbei, that’s not the point! The things he was saying—”

“It’s over already.” Wei-qianbei’s voice is kind but firm. “There’s no point in arguing over something that’s already happened, alright? And just some words, at that! Your qianbei has defeated much worse things than an insult or two!”

He looks over the rest of the juniors. The three tables of young disciples stare back at him, each face its own special shade of dismay. “Aiii, so many solemn little faces. Cheer up, cheer up, don’t look so stern, you’re too young for frown lines…how about this, Wei-qianbei will treat you to douhua, to cool off from this nasty heat!”

Sure enough, he pulls out his silken money pouch (“Not like it’s your money anyway,” mutters Jin Ling, arms crossed petulantly, “all of that is Hanguang-jun’s.” “Very correct! But what’s mine is his, and what’s his is mine, so technically I *am* treating you.”) and calls over the lady of the tavern; first, to apologize for the earlier disturbance, and second, to order twelve bowls of iced douhua with ginger syrup.

The dessert is brought over on two giant trays, and the disciples chorus out a thanks to their Wei-qianbei even as they struggle to conceal their lingering anger. Jingyi, who looks particularly grumpy, gets a surprise-attack in the form of an iced bowl to the back of his neck —he shrieks at the sensation, and Wei-qianbei breaks out in chiming peals of laughter.

The rest of the meal is spent with their senior babbling on to lift their spirits, and the juniors burying their unvoiced protests under cold spoonfuls of crushed peanuts and mung beans.

The whole time, Wei-qianbei doesn’t stop smiling for a second.

Sizhui knocks at his room later that night, after most of the disciples have settled down in their rooms to sleep.

“Baba? Can I come in?”

His baba opens the door with a smile, expression warm in the same way it always is whenever Sizhui calls him by that name. The hairs at the edges of his face curl damply; his cheek is flushed red like it’s been scrubbed at, roughly. “Of course! No son of mine will be turned away at my door, even when it *is* the middle of the night!”

It’s hardly *hai shi*, but Sizhui takes the joke in stride. He allows Wei-qianbei to herd him over to the table and sits down across from his baba, who leans forward and folds his hands together in front of him. “What is it? Can’t fall asleep?”

“Not exactly,” Sizhui hedges. It doesn’t count as not being able to sleep if he had never gotten into bed in the first place. “It’s about what happened at dinner.”

Wei-qianbei’s features go soft in the flickering glow of the candle.

“Oh, A-Yuan.”

Sometimes, Wei-qianbei will let his walls down just long enough to be perceived. It scarcely happens at times when they’re alone together, and a bit more often when Hanguang-jun is also there.

Sizhui used to worry that perhaps it had something to do with himself, how rarely his baba would allow him to see the inner bruised parts of his soul. He hadn’t held it against Wei-qianbei, feeling too raw to push too hard and destroy this one fragile connection to his Life

Before, too afraid to lose his Xian-gege, whom he had already lost once before—until Father had taken him aside one day and explained that *Wei Ying is used to having to be very strong and very okay, all the time, because his life taught him to be so. He learned early that if he ever showed any part of his softness, any hint of his underbelly, he would be bitten. It's nothing to do with you, Sizhui; it's simply that he will need a very, very long time to unlearn it.*

Now, Wei-qianbei's guard slips, just long enough for Sizhui to see the pained look flash across his face. "I do wish you didn't have to see all that."

"Baba…"

Wei-qianbei speaks seriously, voice low and modulated like he's repeating something he's rehearsed. "I've made a lot of mistakes in my lives, A-Yuan. I don't regret the reasons for my actions, but…I hurt so many people. People say ugly, ugly things in their hurt, and in their grief. And I can't expect them to forget and forgive just because it was a long time ago."

Sizhui bites back his indignant, *But that's exactly what you do for them*.

"...That man was so rude to you, though. You didn't even do anything to him. And you didn't stand up for yourself."

Wei-qianbei shakes his head. "There are so many people out there who hate me, and everyone has a right to their own anger, A-Yuan. I can't fight with all of them. It would be impossible."

"We could do it for you." It slips out without Sizhui meaning to.

His words hang in the air, but he steels himself and repeats them louder—because they're out now, voiced aloud, and only now does Sizhui realize just how much he wants Wei-qianbei to understand. It burns in him, scored-bone and flayed-flesh deep, persistent and violent and without end—for the queue of people who eagerly step all over his baba without a thought seems to stretch out into the horizon, and Sizhui is so *sick* of it.

"We could fight them for you! Baba, in your lifetime, how many people have spat in the face of your kindness? Even when you're saving their lives, they mistreat you. I won't let it happen. It isn't *fair!"*

"Oh, my kind, sweet boy." Wei-qianbei reaches out to squeeze Sizhui's hand. Sizhui almost snatches his hand away—but that would be wrong, and needlessly hurtful. Wei-qianbei isn't the one he's mad at. "Life is never fair. You can't fight all the injustices in the world."

"But *you* tried to! You still do!" Sizhui sounds like a child now, begging. He doesn't even know what he's asking for.

"And look at where that got me." For a split second, his baba looks so sad, in a way that makes Sizhui's gut ache, makes him think of grave-dust and mountain fog and the taste of rotten radish—and in the next, it's gone. Flattened out into a glassy mirror, frozen-lake smooth, reflecting nothing but sky.

“Go to bed, A-Yuan,” Wei-qianbei says into the night-hazed silence. “You’ll feel better in the morning.”

Jingyi is still awake when Sizhui makes it back to their shared room. He props himself up with an elbow as Sizhui slides the door closed behind him, pushing his loose hair out of his face. “Were you with Wei-qianbei?”

Sizhui heaves a deep sigh. “Yeah.”

A rustle of sheets. “He’s acting like it’s all fine?”

Sizhui tugs harshly at his outer robe. “Mhm. I don’t think he’ll even tell Hanguang-jun what happened. And I don’t think he wants me to, either.”

Jingyi watches him with knowing eyes. “But you aren’t gonna listen to him, are you.”

Sizhui says nothing. He blows out the candle, crawls into bed, and glares off into the dark, listening to the throbbing drum-beat thump of his own heart, before eventually drifting off into sleep.

When they get back to the Cloud Recesses, Wei-qianbei gives his report of the night-hunt to Hanguang-jun during their family dinner.

He chatters on about the smallest details—how Lan Qianyue, the youngest and clumsiest of the group, tripped over her robes climbing up into the mountains, yet managed to take down two fox spirits at once; how Jin Ling claimed the douhua served at the tavern was inferior to Lotus Pier’s, but ordered an extra bowl anyway; how the innkeeper’s second daughter fell in crush-at-first-sight with Ouyang Zizhen, and shyly handed him a fresh custard bun the morning before they left the inn.

He doesn’t say a single word about the rude cultivator from the Zhang sect.

Sizhui sits quietly through the meal, smiling and nodding in all the right places during the conversation. The next afternoon, when Wei-qianbei is busy teaching his cohort of baby juniors out in the training fields, Sizhui requests a private audience with Hanguang-jun.

And a day later, the senior head of combat at Zhoushan Zhang is quietly and unceremoniously removed from his position.

Nüwa could not bring herself to wait for Yan Di to take her to the sea. She wanted desperately to see it for herself—the great glowing ball of the sun emerging from beneath the waves and rising gently into the sky, chasing back the shadows of the night. So one day, when her father’s head was turned, she took one of his boats and sailed out into the sea on her own, looking for the sunrise.

But the wind was strong and the sea was violent, and poor little Nüwa was flung overboard in a storm. Salt water filled her lungs, and the great crashing waves dragged her down and drowned her. In death, she was reincarnated as the bird called Jingwei.

Fang Lixin is one of the most well-mannered and promising guest disciples that the Cloud Recesses has ever seen.

Or at least, that's what Sizhui's heard from the bevy of seniors and clan members that he's run into since the Cloud Recesses' guest disciple period has started. Each of them speak in impressed and glowing tones of the boy's diligence and elegance, his cultured and remarkable upbringing.

Sizhui himself has only just reached the age where he can begin leading lectures for the younger disciples. He finds it a hard adjustment—he's much more used to being on the receiving end of a lecture than he is to being the one reciting page after page of information from memory, all while pacing back and forth in front of a room of teenagers who aren't that much younger than he is.

"Don't worry," Wei-qianbei tells him whenever he comes to him with his troubles, "you're doing a great job! I'm quite tapped into the rumor mill here, you know, and word is you're rising quickly through the ranks of this year's Disciple Favorites list! I wouldn't have done half as well when I was your age!"

Sizhui takes that compliment with a grain of salt, given Wei-qianbei's seemingly heavens-bestowed aptitude for teaching—and the fact that, in Sizhui's generation, Wei-qianbei was at the *top* of the Disciple Favorites list.

But his insecurities about teaching and his baba's platitudes aside—from what Sizhui can tell, Fang Lixin truly is one of the best-behaved students in his classes. The boy never slouches in class, writes neat and meticulous papers, always seems engaged and interested in the lesson content, and helps his fellow guest disciples study in his free hours, should they fall behind in their own work. When Sizhui dismisses class, he always calls out a bright "Thank you, Lan-laoshi!" before he leaves the room. He even helps Sizhui carry the class materials from time to time.

All things considered, Fang Lixin is the dream student. Which is probably why Sizhui is so taken aback at the incident, when it happens.

It's a quiet morning—late enough that the blue of early dawn has receded from the mountain, but early enough that there's still a light fog in the trees and a heavy frost on the grass. Sizhui can tell that the snow will come soon—each breath leaves his mouth in soft white puffs that hang in the air, like the sigh of a great dragon.

Red-cheeked disciples pile into the hall, those who have not yet adjusted to the traditional Lan sleeping schedule looking bleary-eyed and rubbing discreetly at their eyes. Sizhui notes the individuals with residual dampness at the hems of their skirts—they must have foregone the walkways and cut across the green on their way from the guest disciple quarters.

Normally, this would necessitate some sort of scolding, but it's an exciting day, and he's feeling lenient enough to let it pass.

"Good morning, everyone," he says cheerfully, and waits for the murmured chorus in reply. "Today's lesson will be different from usual—we have a guest lecturer!"

He steps to the side and waves in Wei-qianbei, who sweeps in from the entrance in a flurry of dark blue and silver.

(In the years since he began living at the Cloud Recesses, his baba's robe color scheme has slowly been adapting to his surroundings. He still wears his signature red and black, of course; "It's just my style," he explains, "and it makes me look so handsome, doesn't it Lan Zhan?"

But he's been gaining new, differently colored outfits in his wardrobe, gentian blue sashes and dove-grey robes and silver headpieces. The first time Sizhui and his fathers went down to Caiyi together, the three of them all in white, he had wanted to shout his pleasure out to the crowds around them; *Look at us,* he had wanted to cry, *See how we fit together. He is one of us, he is ours.*)

"I'm sure most of you know this already, but Wei-qianbei is considered to be one of the top experts on alternative cultivation." At the introduction, Wei-qianbei gives the disciples a smile and a little wave; already, Sizhui can see the stirrings of excitement ripple through the hall, like a stone tossed into a pond. "Today, he'll be giving a lesson about the signs of resentful energy, and how best to combat it."

Wei-qianbei steps forward. "Hello, everyone! I'll be your lecturer for today! Feel free not to call me laoshi, that makes me feel old; qianbei is fine. Let's start off with—oh? Yes?"

Fang Lixin has stood up from his desk.

"Excuse me," he says, eyes blank. He's not even looking at Wei-qianbei. "I don't feel well. I'm going to see the healers."

"Well—alright," Wei-qianbei says bemusedly, as Fang Lixin turns abruptly on his heel and strides out the door. "Uh, Sizhui, why don't you go after him, make sure everything's okay? Thank you. Where was I?"

Sizhui doesn't need to go far to find him; he catches up to Fang Lixin just three doors away, staring into the white gravel that fills the courtyards.

"Lixin?" As Fang Lixin faces him, Sizhui notes the tense set of his jaw, as if he's clenching his teeth. Sizhui winces inwardly—Fang Lixin must be incredibly uncomfortable. He's never

had a disciple walk out of his class because of illness before, but as Wei-qianbei often says, there must be a first time for everything.

“How are you feeling? Do you need me to walk you to the healers? Come, we can go through the courtyard to get there faster—”

“Lan-laoshi, I’m not actually sick.”

“...I see,” says Sizhui, not understanding. “If you are not sick, then...Wei-qianbei’s lectures are actually quite engaging, I’m sure you don’t want to miss out. Is whatever matter you need to take care of truly that urgent?”

“If I may speak frankly, Lan-laoshi,” Fang Lixin looks up, gaze strange and steely in a way Sizhui has never seen before. “I don’t want to sit through a lecture given by Wei Wuxian.”

Ah.

Morning birdsong, the biting cold at his nose-tip, and then—that familiar black emotion, welling up like oil from its secret home in his belly. This time, it comes with an extra layer; disappointment in his student, one who he had thought to be better than this.

Despite his better judgement, Sizhui holds back the tirade waiting in his throat and tries the civil approach. He recalls his baba’s soft words—*everyone has a right to their own anger, A-Yuan*—and folds an arm behind his back, channeling the jade-like composure of his other father.

“I understand if you have some personal grievances with Wei-qianbei. However, the lecture material for today will be very helpful for the practical exercises we have scheduled next week. Perhaps I can arrange for—”

“Personal—?! My family history has not been dirtied by the influences of the Yiling Patriarch!” Fang Lixin cries out, interrupting for the second time.

Sizhui stiffens at the title. He does not recognize his widely-lauded model student in this moment; all he sees is that horribly familiar disgust in the blazing of the boy’s eyes, in the snarling curve of his lips.

Fang Lixin stutters a bit, aware of his rudeness in interrupting, and wary of the indescribable expression creeping onto his instructor’s face—but he continues on. “My father and mother have told me of the atrocities he committed during the war. They were not there, but accounts of his evil ways are known far and wide! The Cloud Recesses harboring him is one thing—I understand that no one dares speak out against the Chief Cultivator himself. But to let him have access to the next generation, to allow him to blatantly brainwash the young and inexperienced, is this something I am not allowed to think is absolutely outrageous?”

Despite the morning chill, Sizhui feels the heat growing within, lighting him up red. He speaks through it the best he can. “If your parents told you of such atrocities, then they should also have told you that he was absolved of most of them soon after his return. Wei-

qianbei's just and compassionate conduct are widely known, and now many admire him for his skill in—"

"Skill in the unrighteous arts! In blood and death!" Fang Lixin's voice raises in indignation, carrying through the courtyard and shattering the stillness of the Cloud Recesses.

At the end of the corridor, Hanguang-jun turns the corner.

"Forgive this disciple for saying so," says the oblivious boy in front of Sizhui, hurtling blindly into a head-on collision with inevitable death via Bichen, "But is Lan-laoshi truly foolish enough to think Wei Wuxian is even qualified to teach students? He does not descend from any of the great sects, is only a *servant's* son, and I've heard rumors that he doesn't even have a golden core—"

Sizhui inhales sharply.

Over Fang Lixin's shoulder, the set of Hanguang-jun's face hardens from snow to ice, and he sweeps over the distance left between them in three long, silent strides, his figure tall and foreboding as a glacier.

"Sizhui."

Fang Lixin nearly jumps out of his skin with fright at the sudden voice over his shoulder. Then he turns, and the rest of the color in his face bleaches out as he follows the line of Hanguang-jun's winter cloak up to meet his piercing stare.

"Hanguang-jun." Sizhui composes himself quickly and inclines his head in respect. "I thought you would still be in your meeting with Zewu-jun. Did you finish early?"

Hanguang-jun lifts his glare from Fang Lixin's quailing figure and nods. "Mn. It was a small matter, and taken care of quickly. Why aren't you in the lecture hall with Wei Ying?"

The momentary slide of Hanguang-jun's eyes back to the terrified boy in between them says that he knows exactly why Sizhui isn't in the lecture hall with Wei-qianbei; he just wants to see Fang Lixin squirm.

And indeed—after Sizhui explains exactly why he and his student are out in the corridors during class time, Hanguang-jun's glare has landed squarely back on Fang Lixin. He trains his eyes on the boy's bloodless face and takes an uncommonly long time to speak, simply taking in the steady and unceasing creep of dread into the boy's eyes.

Never let it be said that Hanguang-jun could not be petty, especially when it came to matters concerning his husband.

When he finally deems the pause to be appropriately uncomfortable, Hanguang-jun speaks in measured tones, cold and sure as the silent snows of the mountain. "The circumstances of one's birth have no bearing on one's capacity for intelligence and goodness. Physical state does not determine ability to teach. Neither does a privileged upbringing give one the moral

high ground to criticize others who were less fortunate, or ability to understand others' innate character."

Hanguang-jun's eyes flash, his displeasure slow and inexorable.

"Wei Ying's ability to overcome hardship is unmatched, as is his talent for cultivation. For an inexperienced individual who has not tasted a fraction of the same challenges to find themselves worthy to lay judgement upon him is, quite frankly...unbelievable."

Fang Lixin flinches back.

Hanguang-jun lets out a barely audible huff of air. It is a credit to how well Sizhui knows him, that he is able to identify it as dark amusement.

To Sizhui, Hanguang-jun says simply, "Disciplinary action is in order. The usual, for slandering a senior Lan member. And additional lines for skipping class and excessive noise. I will accompany you to the Library Pavilion."

They make their way there in a frozen silence. When Sizhui and Hanguang-jun do finally leave the library, Fang Lixin is copying his first lines, head bowed in shame, from the ongoing and revised *Biography of Wei Wuxian: Life and Accomplishments* under the watchful eyes of the Master of Discipline.

"Wei Ying's lecture ends soon," Hanguang-jun states, and starts off in the direction of the lecture hall. Sizhui follows quietly behind, his thoughts a raging storm.

As they pass under the stretching branches of one of the many dark, hardy pines that sprout around the Cloud Recesses, Hanguang-jun pauses momentarily to fall in pace with his son. "Something is bothering you, Sizhui."

Sizhui didn't realize he'd been so obvious. He attempts to school his features. "It's nothing, Father."

"You are upset." It's the voice Hanguang-jun would use when Sizhui was younger, and would wake up from hot, blurry night terrors, crying out for people he didn't remember. His father would get out of bed, slow from the pain of his wounds but steady all the same, and whisper to him, holding his tiny child's hand between his own warm palms until Sizhui fell asleep again. "Tell me."

Faced with that tone, Sizhui has little choice but to comply.

"I'm just...I know it's unbecoming, but I'm so frustrated. Fang Lixin is so young, compassionate besides, known for caring for his peers—at least, I thought he was. His family wasn't even involved in the war, they just taught him the same rumors they heard from others—and Baba's name was cleared years ago, yet...over and over, generation after generation. It seems like it will never end, and—"

Sizhui breaks off, clutching at his own sleeves, and worries the thick material in between his fingers, an un-Lan-ish childhood habit that Hanguang-jun had never sought to break him of.

“I don’t understand.” He sighs, after a helpless silence. “What more do people want from him?”

Hanguang-jun slows as they approach the lecture hall. He contemplates Sizhui’s words with the same air of thoughtfulness that he affords to the most important of the clan leaders, and when they are but a handful of paces from where the thinly-papered doors stand shut, he answers, voice quiet.

“When one’s reputation is set, it takes nothing less than a million contradictions to turn the tides of public opinion. One attempt will appear to do nothing. It will be swallowed up in the opposition. So it takes time, and effort, for such change to show.”

He pauses, eyes trained on the hall entrance.

“I did not comprehend this for a long time, Sizhui; but for Wei Ying, the only cause he will never fight for is himself.”

The doors open; disciples begin to stream out as the lecture ends, and several of them call out bright-eyed thanks back into the hall for ‘Wei-laoshi’.

“Despite all he has done for others, he does not see his own case as a worthy cause. So the only thing we can do is to persist. Do you understand?”

Sizhui nods wordlessly. Young teens flow down the hall in groups and pairs, sending goggling, shy glances to Hanguang-jun, who stands bright and regal to the side of the path, and warm smiles to Sizhui, who greets them back with smiles of his own.

They stand at the entrance until Wei-qianbei emerges, ushering out the last few star-struck loiterers. His face lights up upon seeing them, and he bounds forward.

“My two most favorite people, my husband *and* my dutiful son, come to greet me at the door! Such fanfare. Lan Zhan, I saw you just earlier this morning~ Did you miss me already? Were you thinking about me so much that you couldn’t bear it, and had to come visit?? Er-gege, how embarrassing!” Wei-qianbei cackles.

“I am always thinking about Wei Ying.” Hanguang-jun replies, serene. He winds an arm around Wei-qianbei’s waist, face calm and content as Wei-qianbei flusters and slaps gently at his shoulder.

In his head, Sizhui wonders when his baba will learn to stop setting himself up like that.

“Oh, Sizhui!” Wei-qianbei changes the subject, cheeks a little red. “The one who left at the beginning of class, F...Fang Lisheng?”—”Fang Lixin.”—”Yes, Fang Lixin! Is he alright? Did you find him?”

“Yes,” Sizhui replies, smile firmly in place. “It’s all taken care of. Baba doesn’t need to worry about it.”

“Oh.” Wei Wuxian blinks. “Alright, I just wanted to make sure! Let’s go, let’s go, I’m starving after all that teaching, what an energetic bunch, how do you do that every day,

Sizhui-ah? How about going down to Caiyi for lunch, there's that one place with the amazing dongpo pork, I haven't had it in so long…"

Fang Lixin's parents show up within the week, causing a ruckus at the front entrance, demanding an explanation for their son's punishment and calling for Wei-qianbei's removal as a teacher.

Sizhui tells no one about the secret and savage pleasure he takes in sending them straight to their meeting with a furious Hanguang-jun.

Jingwei hated the sea for what it had done to her. In the dawn of her second life, she swore an oath to fill up the sea no matter how long it would take.

Day after day she persisted, flying out from the shore every day to collect sticks and stones and drop them in. And without fail, every single one of Jingwei's scavenged items would sink quickly out of sight, swallowed up by the hungry, endless mouth of the sea.

Despite the wind-swift passing of years that foist Sizhui's generation from young teenagers into the maturity of senior disciples, they remain an excitable and trouble-seeking bunch, known for their high energy, extensive accomplishments, and general tendency for playfulness.

They also have an inclination for extraordinary competitiveness—tests of skill where they rack up as many night-hunt trick shots as possible; fights over who, excluding Jin Ling, Fairy would run to first if she were put in a wide circle of people all holding raw lamb bones; silly little competitions to determine who can fit the most sunflower seeds in their mouth, when they are served alongside their wine.

Their crowning favorite—especially among the individuals most loyal to Wei-qianbei—is a game called *Inconveniencing And Annoying Yao-zongzhu At Every Possible Moment*.

Jingyi is currently in the lead after serving the sect leader in question a special tea with a delayed laxative effect, in revenge for trying to push aid requests from his own region onto Hanguang-jun. He has narrowly beaten out Jin Ling, who made Yao-zongzhu wait in the Koi Tower receiving hall for three hours after he made a sexist remark to the Jin head disciple.

Zizhen is somewhat lagging behind, only managing to 'trip' and spill a bowl of soup on Yao-zongzhu's second finest robes, but they all agree that this is understandable, since there is

only so much havoc Zizhen can wreak upon his father's old friend before bringing down heavy punishment on his own head.

And Sizhui has never fully participated in this particular competition, for reasons that he is definitely, positively sure must have made sense to him at the moment.

However, the longer he sits here—the air in the room choking and humid in the lingering early-autumn heat, the dusty taste of a truly awful blend of chrysanthemum tea thick on his tongue, and inane drivel buzzing like a mosquito in his ears—the harder it becomes to remember exactly what those reasons were.

"Yao-zongzhu," he says for the third time, resisting the urge to slap his hand to his lightly-sweating brow, "I truly am sorry, but the spirit-attraction flags you are requesting simply are not ready yet. Wei-qianbei has been working tirelessly these past few weeks, but he would prefer to do several additional rounds of testing before releasing them for use."

"This is preposterous!" Yao-zongzhu replies, slamming his hand down on the table.

His teacup, already over-full, slops out a dribble of tea that leaks down the slope of the wood and nearly stains his robes. Yao-zongzhu mutters out a dark curse; the attending disciple at his side leaps forward to mop it up with a cloth, before any liquid can drip off the table's edge.

Next to Sizhui, Jingyi coughs his suppressed laughter into the back of his hand, quieting only when Sizhui kicks him in the ankle.

Yao-zongzhu clears his throat. "I made the request for those flags a month ago! Surely the work ethic of the *prodigious* Wei Wuxian has not fallen to such dire straits, that he cannot complete a few simple talismans?"

It is with the greatest of efforts that Sizhui does not ball his hands into fists at that particularly condescending tone of voice. Instead, he folds them in his lap, willing himself to maintain his pleasant smile and bank the flame of frustration in his chest.

"Yao-zongzhu, as I said before, Wei-qianbei believes that further testing is required. When it comes to increasing the attraction radius to such a large distance, as well as modifying them to only attract one type of *yao,* improperly made flags can be dangerous—he wants to avoid any potential problems, and I believe your disciples would appreciate that as well. Your order was substantially larger than what is standard, but it will only be a week more."

That is what Hanguang-jun had told him, in the letter asking him to stop by Pingyang on their way back after a night-hunt and deliver the message. *Wei Ying has been working late into the night after he finishes teaching class. He tells me that the last rounds of testing should be concluded within the week. I have attempted to propose that he adopt a less punishing schedule and pace himself, but he believes that finishing the spirit-attraction flags takes priority over his own rest. I wonder at his dedication to such a task.*

Even unwritten in the neat columns of his father's elegantly inked calligraphy, Sizhui read the extra meaning quite clearly—because he was thinking the very same thing. *They are not*

worth his effort. What have these people ever done for him?

"Another *week!* If I had known it would take so long, I would have asked my own sect to create these talismans for me, instead of putting my trust in another!"

Yao-zongzhu huffs and puffs in his indignation, nostrils flaring; absurdly, Sizhui thinks of the overworked, lowing black oxen they passed in the paddies on the way over. He holds his tongue.

Jingyi stops, mid tea-induced-grimace, to add his own two cents to the conversation. "Wei-qianbei is the highest authority on the use and making of spirit-attraction flags," he says, arms crossed and elbows propped up on the table in a way that he knows every 'respectable' cultivator over the age of fifty detests. "Surely Yao-zongzhu knew that, since you specifically came to bother Gusu Lan for this commission, instead of doing the work yourself in the first place?"

"You—!" Yao-zongzhu's face, already ruddy with heat and displeasure, deepens into a truly remarkable jujube-red. "I will not be spoken to with such disrespect in my own sect by some—some young brat!"

"This young brat came all the way to Pingyang to deliver an in-person message to you that could've been summarized in a half-page letter!" Jingyi shoots back, short ponytail swinging.

"*Tch!* Is this how the Gusu Lan raise their disciples?! Lan Sizhui, control your companion!"

"Jingyi," Sizhui says, as lightly as he can.

"Sorry," Jingyi mutters, not sounding very sorry at all. However, he subsides into silence and sits back into his seat, blowing his bangs out of his face.

"Yao-zongzhu, my apologies—it has been a long day, and in his fatigue Jingyi often says things he does not mean." Actually, he knows for a fact that Jingyi meant his words and more, but lying is not prohibited *outside* the Cloud Recesses, so Sizhui must take his chances where he can get them.

Yao-zongzhu makes a grumbling noise, but otherwise shows no indication of protest. Sizhui takes that as a sign to move on.

"As for the spirit-attraction flags—regrettably, Wei-qianbei is very occupied with his busy schedule and cannot accelerate the process any further than he already has. However, this disciple assures you that your flags will be ready for you within the week, and not a day more."

Sect Leader Yao's eyes grow sharp. "Busy schedule?"

"Yes. Aside from teaching junior classes to our younger disciples, Wei-qianbei also fulfills sect duties as Hanguang-jun's spouse and conducts his own research on the suppression of resentful energy—"

"Teaching? Research? Pah! As if!"

Sizhui stops. His hands, still folded in his lap, twitch and tighten convulsively.

“Forgive this disciple for asking. But I do not understand Yao-zongzhu’s meaning.”

“I think it should be clear!”

“I am afraid it is not.” Sizhui’s fingers dig into the meat of his thighs, tight enough to bruise. “If Yao-zongzhu would kindly elaborate.”

Yao-zongzhu draws himself up to his full height.

“What is the value of Wei Wuxian’s research in comparison to the patronage of the Yao Sect? What accomplishments can he achieve that are more pressing than the needs of another cultivational sect? The foolishness of your people, to allow him free rein instead of putting him to proper work...If anything, Wei Wuxian should be grateful for our commission—he should be grateful that we are making him useful!”

And with that, the flame in Sizhui’s chest roars into a wildfire.

(Sizhui had not been in the room, all those years ago, when the truth of the former Chief Cultivator’s machinations finally came to light. He had not seen the switch-flip of the mob’s animosity rise from Wei-qianbei’s shoulders and descend, jaws bared, onto Jin Guangyao’s head in the span of a few minutes. He had not seen how the cultivational world had swept Wei-qianbei back into its oh-so-forgiving lap, the instant he had proven his capacity as their living, breathing tool—the axe upon the chicken’s neck, to keep their hands clean.

What Sizhui *had* seen was the way Yao-zongzhu had gone from calling his baba “the Yiling Patriarch” to calling him “Wei-gongzi”—but only ever to his face, when such blatant public disrespect meant retribution from the Chief Cultivator himself; the way that at every cultivational conference for the past five years, Yao-zongzhu’s performatively simpering tone could not quite conceal the way he tried to undermine Wei-qianbei’s suggestions at every turn; the way that even now, in front of Wei-qianbei’s son-in-all-but-blood, “Wei Wuxian” was spat from his unworthy mouth, hissing and knife-sharp, like a curse.

In the years since Wei-qianbei’s resurrection, countless numbers of people had seen fit to impose themselves on his generosity, to demand his skills and services for themselves. Most of them had been the same people who had howled, blood-lusting and frenzied, for his immediate capture and execution at the violent end of his first life.

And not one of them, sect leader or otherwise, had attempted to make a single reparation for what they had done to him.)

“Useful,” Sizhui repeats, voice whisper-quiet.

In the part of his brain that is not suddenly alight with an indescribable fire, he notes that Jingyi has gone still with apprehension next to him.

Yao-zongzhu takes no notice. “Indeed! What else does he have to offer to the cultivational world besides? After the Sunshot Campaign, when he spent every night at the bottom of a

wine jar and barely lifted a hand to help the Jiang sect rebuild—”

Wei-qianbei’s face in the candle-light, drawn and shadowed and tired beyond his years. Like there was nothing else he thought he could do. *Everyone has a right to their own anger, A-Yuan.*

You do, too.

“One might argue that Wei-qianbei was the reason there was an ‘after’,” Sizhui says, cutting straight over Yao-zongzhu’s ranting. He can hardly recognize the sound of his own voice, the rush of blood in his ears drowning out everything else but the raging of his own heart. “I often hear tales of the day he took on two hundred men and won single-handedly, how he commanded both respect and fear on the battlefield. What was Yao-zongzhu doing during the war?”

Yao-zongzhu frowns. “Excuse me?”

“I have heard nothing of the Yao sect’s accomplishments in the liberations of the Sunshot Campaign. Yao-zongzhu, you said it yourself; how can you be compared to Wei-qianbei?”

“You—you dare question my accomplishments? My men led the siege upon the Burial Mounds—!”

“Ah, the Burial Mounds,” says Sizhui venomously, words falling in a great rushing torrent from his mouth. “A great accomplishment for an esteemed individual such as yourself, to raze down a mountain full of weak, defenseless people like pigs for slaughter. Destroying the lives of innocents. Yao-zongzhu must be quite proud, since that falls into his usual line of work anyway.”

Jingyi gasps behind him, part shock, part glee. “Sizhui!”

Across the table, Yao-zongzhu is practically foaming at the mouth. “*Impudent!”* he bellows, spittle flying through the air. He struggles to his feet, the white-faced Yao disciple once again lunging forward to help him up.

Sizhui leans forward dangerously.

“What *I* find impudent is the way you continue to treat my father, despite all that he has done for you! In the time before his resurrection, you made regular use of the fruits of his labor—the spirit-attracting flags only one of many such objects—all while cursing his name and celebrating, year after year, the day your collective efforts drove him to his death. And now, years after his innocence has been revealed, you still demand for him to prove a hundred times over, without proper thanks or appreciation, that he is worthy of a life that you never gave to him. You had no hand in his return, nor in the clearing of his name! So please tell me, Yao-zongzhu...why should you be rewarded for your ungratefulness?”

Yao-zongzhu sputters, speechless with rage.

“Forgive me, but your hypocrisy is astounding,” Sizhui concludes, chin raised. “If one’s utility is the singularly most accurate measure of worth and capability, then I am surprised at how Yao-zongzhu ever became a sect leader.”

The room rings with the sudden quiet like the silence after a storm, unbroken but for the sound of Yao-zongzhu choking on his own anger. Sizhui feels a peaceful stillness wash over him, cooling the riotous heat in his chest like a soak in the Cloud Recesses’ cold springs.

Miraculously, Yao-zongzhu finds within himself enough control to speak. *“Out!* ” he screeches, eyes bulging. “I will not abide by this! I want these wretches *thrown out!*”

“No need,” Sizhui says, calm as anything. “We will see ourselves out. I apologize for losing my temper, Yao-zongzhu, and I must inform you that the Lan sect will no longer concern itself with your commissions; you may find another person to make *useful* elsewhere.”

He stands and bows, as shallowly as he can. “Good day. Jingyi, let’s go.”

They leave in a sweep of white.

Jingyi finally finds his voice as they pass from the silence of the Yao sect’s front courtyard into the busy street beyond, the bustle of calling fruit-hawkers and strolling passers-by rushing in with a wave of noise. “Heavens above, Sizhui,” he cries, eyes wide. “I didn’t know you had all that in you! Oh, he really had it coming, that miserable old goat, talking about Wei-qianbei like that. No one’s going to be able to steal your thunder, Sizhui, not for another year at least!”

Sizhui finally feels his muscles un-tense. He breathes in deeply. It tickles a little bit, the air outside thick with dust kicked up by the children passing by with their woven-straw balls.

“That’s not exactly what I was aiming for,” he admits, “but I’m not going to turn down that advantage! You all have to buy me pork buns now.”

His friend groans. “Ah, yes, yes, okay, you’re the ultimate winner. I don’t think anyone’s gonna argue with you on that. Wait until Jin Ling and Zizhen hear about this, they’re gonna lose their minds!”

Then Jingyi pauses, mid-laugh. “Oh, but what are you going to tell Hanguang-jun? All those spirit-attraction flags...Wei-qianbei worked so hard on them, too.”

Sizhui hums. “There are plenty of other sects that would die to have those talismans on hand. Wei-qianbei won’t have any problems with finding someone else to sell them to.”

Jingyi nods thoughtfully, face still flushed with excitement. “Ooh, you’re definitely right about that.”

In his mind’s eye, Sizhui summons up the contemptuous set of Hanguang-jun’s mouth whenever he has to deal with Yao-zongzhu in any existing capacity, the barely-veiled animosity whenever the man so much as breathes at Wei-qianbei. Then he recalls again the ugly, outraged twist of Yao-zongzhu’s face as he and Jingyi turned to leave.

He smiles.

“And you know what? Something tells me that Hanguang-jun won’t be too upset with me, either.”

Foolish thing, scoffed the Eastern Sea as Jingwei spanned its waters in her tireless quest, never stopping except to sleep and eat. I am as deep as your mountains, and wide as the open blue sky. You will not fill me in a million years.

Jingwei replied, Then I will spend ten million, fifty million, even a hundred million years trying, so no child will ever again drown in your waves as I did.

And so, to this day, Jingwei is still—

Wei Wuxian! Why are you telling stories about drowning to a four-year-old?!

Ah—ah, stop hitting me! He asked me for one, alright, and this was the first story I could remember!

Hm, I’m surprised that you know any stories at all. Don’t pout at me, get up. Something has triggered the wards at the base of the mountain again.

Ah, really? That’s the third time in a week; they must really have nothing else better to do. Give me a second—ahhh, my knees. I must be getting old, haha.

Xian-gege, story! Finish the story!

Uh-uh, A-Yuan. I have to go do something important right now, but I’ll finish later, okay? Be good for Wen Qing-jiejie. You know your Xian-gege is going to Lanling to see his own jiejie tomorrow, right? If A-Yuan is extra good right now, I’ll even bring back a toy from the markets. A fancy toy, the ones that only Lanling can have. How about that?

Okay. Xian-gege promised!

“Jingyi,” Sizhui asks one mild day, when they’re in the meadows together, tossing handfuls of bruised cabbage leaves and carrot tops into the hopping mass of rabbits at their feet, “Have you heard of the story of Jingwei?”

“Mm? Yeah.” Jingyi looks up from where he’s been prodding at a particularly fat bunny with the tip of his foot. “The spirit-guardian of children at the Eastern Sea, right? My mom told

me about it when I was younger. Why?"

"Don't bully the rabbits." Sizhui sets his basket down and crouches; the rabbits, familiar with his presence, crowd closer to search the folds of his clothing for treats. He reaches out to stroke at a fuzzy little head. "What do you think of the story?"

"Kinda cool...maybe a little sad, I guess? I never really thought about it much," says Jingyi as he joins his friend on the ground, trying to sit so that his white robes won't be stained by the ground. It doesn't work, of course—there's something about him that just seems to attract these sorts of problems. Wei-qianbei calls it *the spice of life.*

Jingyi continues on. "It just seems kinda unfair that she'd die so young to begin with, and then spend the rest of her second life fighting against something that ruined her first one. Like, if it were me, I don't know if I'd even bother, you know? I'd probably say fuck it and just go off and enjoy my life on my own terms."

"Language, Jingyi," Sizhui scolds absently. The rabbit under his hands butts against his palm, little pink nose twitching.

"Sorry. What would I even do if I were a bird? Huh. I guess I'd eat a lot of worms and get really fat. I could be the type of bird that just mooches off other people and sits around singing all day, like the ones that we caught Wei-qianbei feeding that one time, the little round ones. Yeah. But I guess it's pretty heroic of Jingwei to do what she did, right? Persistence, and saving the ones that come after you, and all that."

"You think?"

"Mm-hm. She must've been one brave girl, if she were willing to do that just to save other kids, don't you think?"

Sizhui sinks back into the long spring grass, laying back to stare up at the heavens.

He thinks about the look on his baba's face when men spit on him, when roadside inns turn him away; when he dips in a ninety-degree bow to passing venerable elders, and gets barely a blink in return; the awful, infinite tide of baseless retribution that pushes Wei-qianbei back and tangles him in the surf, over and over and over.

He thinks about the indescribable feeling that rises in his own belly, around those people—that all-consuming burn that threatens to overflow out of him, to spill out in a sun-hot blaze. The way he aches to release it, let it flow free and burn everything in its path.

And he thinks about tireless, true-hearted Jingwei—day blending into moonlit night, head high and claws ever-reaching, trying endlessly to smother the sea that killed her.

"I don't know," he says finally. "I think part of it was anger, too."

Over his head, the blue sky stretches, vast and splendid and deep as swelling water.

And so, to this day, thousands of years after she began, Jingwei is still trying to fill the sea.

If you ever visit the Eastern Coast, you might even find her there;

a beautiful little speckled bird, flying high upon the ceaseless wind above the heaving surface, her red feet dropping stone after stone into the foamy waves below.

End Notes

now with amazing art by wujihusbuns on twitter!

the story being told is my embellished version of the chinese myth, jingwei fills the sea.

also it's jingyi's birthday today!! happy birthday best boy, your gift is a front-row seat to your soft-spoken best friend tearing yao-zongzhu a new one!! that dusty mofo had it coming for sure

say hi on twt

Works inspired by this one

[Podfic] the stone-filled sea by yukla by Beria1021

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